Media and Culture

Mark P. Orbe
Western Michigan University

*The "Reality" of
Media Effects*

Journey Through Chapter 11

Sightseeing: On your journey, you will visit basic concepts related to media and culture that reflect social scientific and social construction perspectives. After a discussion of types of media and various media theories, the chapter will offer you reality television and its representations and constructions of various cultures in order to further examine these theories. Media effects and media literacy are also discussed.

Souvenir: After your journey, you will be a better informed media consumer and media critic aware of various theories through which to view and understand the media to which you are exposed daily and its relation to culture.

The media is a powerful presence in people's lives. Within the field of communication, media is the term used to refer to the particular medium used to deliver a message to a large, anonymous, diverse audience (Pearce, 2009a). Media studies involve research on media effects, which refer to the influence that the media has on audiences, and media representations, which are portrayals of various cultural groups. At the core of social construction is the idea that there is no such thing as objective reality (Pearce, 1995). Instead, scholars who advocate for this foundation stress that all knowledge is historically and culturally specific (Allen, 2005). Media, as a powerful social system, plays an important role in creating a person's sense of reality (Gergen, 1999). Even those persons who closely monitor their media consumption are not immune to media effects. Media consumption

Photo 11.1   Did you ever feel like a celebrity? Due to international media representations, children unaccustomed to seeing non-Japanese foreigners or *gaijin* may treat them like celebrities. In this photo, a U.S. American is asked for his autograph by a group of children happy to meet him on a bus.

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refers to what and how much media you are exposed to. The problem is that a lot of the messages that people get from the media are taken in unconsciously. People may think that they can be exposed to the media without being influenced by it, but this seems to be an impossible thing to do.

The first step in recognizing the role that the media plays in your life is to take inventory of your own media consumption. Think about a "normal" day. Given the hectic nature of many students' lives while in school, it may be helpful to list a normal day when attending and not attending college. First, list the number of hours you spend each day watching television. Within this figure, be sure to include time typically spent watching DVDs and time spent watching television shows or movies online. Next, add the number of hours spent listening to music, reading books, newspapers, and magazines, surfing the Internet, and so forth. Second, conduct a mental inventory of how different cultural groups, such as Middle Easterners,

senior citizens, people with disabilities, or persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT), are portrayed in various media forms. Do you notice any patterns? This simple, two-step process is a good point of reflection in terms of understanding how the media influences our perceptions of others.

This chapter focuses on the role that media plays in terms of inter/cultural communication. First, you are introduced to a general overview of media concepts and terms. Second, a brief explanation of different media theories is offered. In order to provide insight into one specific type of media from multiple theoretical perspectives, the third section applies these concepts and theories to different examples of reality television in the United States (Orbe, 1998, 2008; Orbe & Hopson, 2002). Last, the chapter concludes by explaining what media literacy is, and how it is an important set of skills to negotiate media influences.

REFLECT 11.1: Based on your own inventory, were you surprised at how much you are exposed to different media forms? How has your use of media changed over time? What, if any, impact do you think these images have on how you feel about yourself and others?

MEDIA

Most people immediately think of television when they hear the word *media*; however, there are many different forms of mediums. Traditionally, media was comprised of a few different types of industries: printed media, recordings, radio, movies, and television. However, recent technological advances—including the increased use of computers—have created easy access to various mass media mediums. In this regard, lines between interpersonal and mass communication have been blurred (Pearce, 2009a). The following section provides brief descriptions of traditional media genres including printed media, recordings, movies, radio, and television. As you read each of these sections, remember what many inter/cultural communication scholars (e.g., Squires, 2009) believe: Media images are an important source of information for people especially in terms of cultural groups with whom they may not have frequent, meaningful interactions. In other words, over time, each of these media sources individually and collectively works to shape your perceptions of others, and directly or indirectly, your communication interactions.

Printed Media

Printed media is the term used to refer to books, newspapers, and magazines. This type of mass media is the oldest. Scholars have traced the history of print media back to over 4,500 years ago when various religious, legal, and personal narratives were published on clay tablets. Although the earliest books were limited to the elite members of society, technological advances like the printing press allowed the medium to enter popular culture with increasing influence (McLuhan, 1962).

Photo 11.2   Well intentioned or offensive? Sometimes behaviors motivated by the best intentions can be construed as offensive. For example, in this picture the Spanish men's Olympic basketball team poses, pre-Beijing Olympics, for an advertisement in a Spanish magazine.

Newspapers, like books, were an early form of mass communication. Dating back to the first century, newspapers moved from elite usage to mass consumption over time. Although many people are moving away from traditional consumption to reading news online, newspapers continue to be a central source of information. Magazines also have an impressive history. Within the United States, the first magazine can be traced to the 1740s. As the industrial revolution developed, so did the number of magazines. By 1900, more than 5,000 different magazines were being published in the United States. Today, a variety of magazines are available including those specifically aimed at women and men, sports fans, professionals, families, youth, and different cultural groups.

Recordings

In 1877, Thomas Edison invented a "talking machine" that allowed him to hear his rendition of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" repeated back to him. His invention set in motion the development of a powerful medium of mass communication. Early recordings have little similarity, in terms of quality, to the digital processes used today. However, the principal concept remains largely the same: Use technology to produce audio images for mass consumption. Most people immediately think about various types of music that have been made popular through recordings. However, other mass mediated messages—like many of Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights speeches in the 1960s—were also distributed to mass audiences through this medium.

Movies

The history of motion (moving) pictures can also be traced back to the 19th century inventions of Thomas Edison. Even before the talking motion-picture era exploded in the 1930s and 1940s, one film powerfully illustrated the impact that this form of mass media could have on the larger society. In 1915, one of the first full-length films of its kind, *Birth of a Nation,* was released to critical acclaim. However, in terms of race relations, the film was criticized for its promotion of African American racial stereotypes. The movie industry has long represented a billion dollar capital venture; however, it has also remained a prominent source of mass mediated images that arguably reinforce existing cultural stereotypes of underrepresented groups (Jackson, 2006; Squires, 2009).

Radio

In 1901, Guglielmo Marconi sent wireless sound across the Atlantic Ocean. This initial breakthrough was followed by successful voice transmission several years later and the creation of the first toll station, which charged advertisers for airtime, going on the air in 1922. From the outset, radio met important cultural needs. It provided a medium for political leaders, like President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to communicate about important issues directly to the U.S. American public. Radio also served as a key source for entertainment including electronic vaudeville, situation comedies, and soap operas. Today, radio continues to function as an influential source of information and entertainment in many cultures. With advanced technology (e.g., computers, satellites), the influence of radio has remained significant.

Take a Side Trip:

If you would like to read more about related issues, visit Appendix B: Local Culture Explored Through Discourse Analysis.

Television

The story of television dates back to the 1920s and 1930s. During the earlier years, many television shows were adopted from radio; these included different quiz shows, soap operas, and situation comedies. Unlike radio, however, television did not start with experimental, noncommercial stations. Television began with established networks supported by advertising sponsors. Like other media forms, television initially was primarily used by a small (wealthy) segment of society. The middle of the 20th century (late 1940s to early 1950s) witnessed an explosion of viewers. In fact, the number of television sets in U.S. American homes went from 172,000 to 17 million in one 4-year period (1948–1952). With the invention of various new media technologies, U.S. American viewers now can have access to hundreds of television channels (Squires, 2009).

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Shushing, Shelving, and Stamping   *Marie L. Radford*

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

If anyone doubted that the traditional stereotype of the librarian is alive and well, convincing evidence to confirm this is easily found. One example is an editorial by Parks from the April 11, 2010 Newark *Sunday Star-Ledger* about the impact on libraries of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's proposed 74% budget reduction to NJ library funding. Parks's editorial supports the librarian's struggle for funding restoration, but even though he is touting the value of libraries in promoting literacy and open, democratic access to information, he opens his article by evoking stereotypical images. He writes: "In both stereotype and practice, New Jersey's librarians are a fairly unexcitable bunch, more prone to shushing than they are to hyperbole. So take this into consideration as you read this from Edison Public Library director Judith Mansbach. 'If this goes through, it's going to be devastating'" (Parks, 2010). The three-column article decries the proposed cuts and mentions a May 6 librarian rally in Trenton, the state capitol. Parks returns to the library stereotype by ending on this note: "Needless to say they could use your help. So if you value your local library—or literacy in general—please make your view known to your legislators. It'll be one time your librarian won't shush you for raising your voice" (Parks, 2010).

This example is one of countless newspaper articles, blogs, cartoons, television shows, commercials, novels, advertisements, motion pictures, and so forth in a broad range of mediated discourse that continue to call to mind the librarian stereotype. Librarians, usually female, are consistently portrayed as bespectacled, mousy, unassuming, sexually repressed introverts who primarily engage in three behaviors—shushing, stamping, and shelving books. The male librarian stereotype, although less prominent, is also unflattering to the profession. Usually portrayed as prissy with the ubiquitous horn-rimmed glasses and bow tie, he is distinctly feminine and, also, therefore accorded the low status of the female librarian.

In another example, during the presidential election of 2008, Republican candidate Sarah Palin was referred to in the news media and on the Internet as the "sexy librarian" type. This characterization fully evokes the idea of the stereotype complete with glasses, bunlike hairdo, and buttoned-up suit with modest high-collared blouse, especially seen before her makeover in the early part of her campaign for the nomination. If one searches in the Google.com Images search engine for "sexy librarian," pictures of Palin are retrieved (see for example http://ktuu.images.worldnow.com/images/7240504_BG5.jpg). Regardless of a person's political affiliation,

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it is of interest to observe how the media portrayed a sitting governor and contender for the U.S. presidency as a member of a feminized profession that is easily objectified, seen as powerless, and open to ridicule. Many librarians were not pleased by this comparison because they objected to Palin's censorship attempt to remove controversial books from the Wasilla public library (Kranich, 2008).

This stereotype has persisted since the early 1900s, despite the information age that has transformed the profession as now being immersed in sophisticated digitized systems and sources. Library collections and archives have rapidly evolved from mainly print ones to rich hybrids featuring full text e-collections of journal articles, e-books, and other web-based resources. Information services are now offered to online users 24/7 via live chat, e-mail, instant messaging, and texting.

I published an article in *Library Quarterly* (Radford & Radford, 1997) that used Foucauldian and feminist thought to analyze the enduring librarian stereotype in the film *Party Girl.* The analysis raised a number of fundamental issues such as the following:

> Who is speaking through the stereotype of the female librarian, and to what ends? What interests does the stereotype serve (certainly not those of women)? How can the image of subservience and powerlessness that it affords to women be challenged and changed? It is not enough to cry out that the stereotype is "wrong," "inaccurate," or "unfair." Such responses are expected, common and futile. It is time to dig deeper, to describe the conditions from which the stereotype is made possible, and to analyze the systems of power/knowledge that go to the very heart of what it means to be male and female, powerful and marginalized, valued and devalued. (p. 263)

Some may dismiss stereotypical texts and images as harmless, cute, or humorous and chide librarians to get a sense of humor. As one who has studied the librarian stereotype in depth, I have come to view these media representations as far from harmless, with serious, anti-intellectual, and antifeminist messages.

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Consider:

1. Where have you found stereotypes of librarians? Who communicated these to you (e.g., media, friends, family, instructors)?

2. Why does the author view the librarian stereotype as a problem? In what ways, if at all, is the librarian stereotype consequential?

3. Do stereotypes of librarians matter? To whom? Why?

4. How does this narrative relate to stereotypes of other cultural groups?

All types of media function as a **cultural socialization agent**. However, of all the different types of media, scholars have spent the most time researching the impact that television has had on personal, cultural, and societal perceptions. This is largely due to the rapid growth of the television industry and its pervasiveness in everyday life. As a socialization agent, the mass mediated images that appear on television, via the news, soap operas, situation comedies, dramas, talk shows, sporting events, and so forth, can have a tremendous influence on how people view themselves and others. Because of this, the governments in some countries ban certain types of programming or only allow television shows that support specific agendas. As such, programs that are produced and aired are oftentimes subject to political, religious, cultural, and social agendas in countries throughout the world. This idea is explored in detail in the concluding sections of this chapter.

All of the different media forms previously discussed—books, magazines, newspapers, recordings, movies, radio, and television—continue to influence your perceptions of self and others. On one hand, people are spending more and more time interacting with new media technologies. Some might argue that this reduces the influence of other mediums. However, on the other hand, it is important to recognize that new media technologies are also enhancing the impact that media has on

Take a Side Trip:

If you would like to read more about related issues, visit Appendix E: South African Culture Explored Through Content Analysis.

people as a whole. For instance, think about what you can do with computers, enhanced recording devices like TiVo, and handheld personal devices. Having these new media technologies allows you to listen to your favorite radio program that airs hundreds of miles away, watch a television show that you missed, read your childhood hometown newspaper, enjoy a video from an independent new band, or see a movie that did not appear in a local theater.

REFLECT 11.2: What are your favorite books, magazines, mp3s, movies, radio stations, and television shows? Do these feature particular cultural groups that you identify with?

MEDIA THEORIES

As human use of media has grown, scholars have become increasingly interested in understanding its impact. The study of media effects has been traced back to the late 19th century (Werder, 2009). However, the exponential growth of the media in the last 75 years has triggered an explosion of research and theorizing aimed to explain how media affect a person's everyday life. This section provides a brief chronology of different media theories. The relevance of these theories to inter/cultural communication is addressed in the following section.

Direct Effects Theory

The earliest media theories were based on the concern that media could be an all-powerful source of influence. Scholars assuming this approach believed that audiences were passive consumers of the media that had direct impacts on viewers. Consequently, this line of theorizing has been described as direct effects theory and was prevalent in the early 20th century (Werder, 2009). These theorists argued that the media images entered naive viewers' consciousness and had immediate consequences. Because of this, direct effects theory was also known as a magic bullet or hypodermic needle approach. Most contemporary communication researchers view these theories as oversimplistic and not giving enough credit to the general public. Yet, some seem to continue to embrace this approach when they argue that certain shows cause viewers to engage in problematic behaviors, such as violence, that is presumed to stem from watching violent television or playing violent video games.

Limited Effects Model

Over time, scholars tested the assumptions of a direct effects approach and found little scientific evidence to support their claims. These results lead scholars to advocate for a limited effects model—a theoretical perspective that argued that media has little influence on people. This model was supported by research that showed that media consumers selectively exposed themselves to media messages that were consistent to their existing belief, attitudes, and values (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). Following the results of this research, theorists concluded that media only had minimal effects on a person's everyday life.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory is another theory that seeks understanding into how the media influences everyday life. This theoretical approach acknowledges audiences as active users of media who are motivated to use different types of media programming to fulfill different needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevich, 1973). According to this theory, media influences vary depending on the functions that the various forms play in the lives of consumers. Research found that viewers were purposeful in their media consumption and actively selected media to satisfy specific needs and wants (Pearce, 2009b).

Cumulative Effects Models

As scholars continued to study media influences, more complex theoretical foundations began to emerge. These new media frameworks acknowledged a balance of potential media effects *and* active media consumption, and are known as cumulative effects models. One such theory focuses on the agenda setting function that the media plays. Early on, scholars within this approach asserted that the media cannot tell people how to think, but it does tell people what to think about. In other words, the media guides people in establishing what is viewed as important. The more you view an issue in the media, the more you feel it is important. More recent work within this area has led scholars to describe ways in which the media also provides direction as to how people should think about the issues that they deem as important (McCombs, 2004).

Cultivation Theory

For many, media represents a window into the world, especially worlds that are not part of their immediate settings. This perspective prompted scholars to explore the relationship between reality and reality as portrayed on television. According to cultivation theory, media consumption works to create distorted perceptions of the world (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). The main idea of the theory is that heavy users—people who have substantial, ongoing exposure to television—begin to view the real world as it exists on television. Cultivation theory research established specific psychological processes that occur with heavy television users. This is the strongest media effects model to date since the magic bullet theory (Werder, 2009).

Critical Cultural Studies of Media

Critical cultural studies continue to extend the work of media scholars interested in exploring the power of the media. This theoretical approach understands the media as a tool of society's most powerful group to remain in power (Hall, 1997) and emerged as a response to previous theories that did not address power inequality. Through this theory, scholars examine how the media relate to matters of ideology, race, gender, social class, and other forms of human diversity. One of the main ideas of this theoretical framework is that the media play a key role in maintaining existing power inequalities such as those discussed in Chapter 8. This is done through subtle influences that typically go unnoticed by viewers.

Each of these media theories provide insight into how mass-mediated images influence a person's perceptions of self, others, and society as a whole. Most contemporary scholars

reject earlier theorizing attempts (i.e., direct effects and limit effects models) as too simplistic in their beliefs that the media is all-powerful or totally harmless. The other theories briefly described here remain relevant to discussions of media influences on inter/cultural communication in the 21st century. Taken together, they are useful for understanding how mass-mediated representations have a cumulative effect in cultivating a societal agenda where cultural difference remains a salient issue that influences inter/cultural communication.

REFLECT 11.3: Are you the type of person that watches lots of reality television or do you despise all reality television? Or, are you like many people who have at least one reality television program that is your "guilty pleasure"—something that you only reluctantly admit to watching? Why?

FOCUS ON REALITY TELEVISION

For many traditionally aged college students, the world has never been without an array of reality television programs. As explained in this section, reality-based programming has a history that spans 60-plus years. However, in recent years, reality television has become the most popular form of entertainment (Schroeder, 2006). Given its mass appeal in the United States and abroad (Hill, 2005), it has moved from the margins of television culture to its core in a dominating fashion. From a television executive perspective, reality television represents an attractive form of programming. It has low production costs. It can easily be marketed for foreign distribution. It also can be produced without dependence on unionized actors and writers (Murray & Ouellette, 2004). These factors, as well as huge popularity among diverse audiences, have propelled reality television from "another fad that overstayed its welcome" (Smith & Wood, 2003, p. 3) to a staple in contemporary television culture.

Although this section focuses on reality TV in the United States, this type of programming has proven to be popular (and profitable) in many countries across the world. In fact, these cheap-to-produce shows have used proven formulae to attract large audiences in many different countries. Kraidy and Sender's (2011) collection of essays offer insight into various global perspectives of reality television. In particular, they demonstrate the rapid globalization of reality television programming and how different shows and formats have been adapted to local, state, and national cultural norms. This includes analyses of *Afghan Star*—Afghanistan's version of *American Idol*—and how Muslim audiences reacted to female contestants' onstage dress and dancing given cultural norms (see also Kraidy, 2010).

Despite its inter/cultural importance, lucrative nature, and mass appeal, reality television critics abound. To many, it remains an extreme form of "trash television" (Geiser-Getz, 1995) that is cheap, sensationalized programming. Given these criticisms, media scholars have failed to study it with any substantial progress (Murray & Ouellette, 2004). Other scholars argue that reality television encompasses a huge variety of high- and low-quality programming—all of which, as forms of popular culture, deserve scholarly attention (Orbe, 2008). Reality television will continue to dominate the television landscape as long as viewers continue to watch in record-breaking numbers. Even if you personally do not watch reality television, it is becoming increasingly hard to avoid (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004, p. 25). Many people admit that they view at least one reality television show regularly that they describe as "a guilty

pleasure." As you read through the broad definition provided in the next section, think about your own experiences with reality television. Also, think about how your perceptions of these programs are influenced by the cultural groups to which you belong (Warren, Orbe, & Greer-Williams, 2003).

Defining Reality Television

What do you think of when you hear the phrase, *reality television?* If you are like many people, you immediately think of some of the most popular shows in recent times: *American Idol, Survivor,* or *Dancing With the Stars.* Others might be more aware of different cable shows such as *The Real World, Run's House,* or *America's Next Top Model.* However, what most people do not realize is that reality television includes an amazingly diverse array of shows.

According to Smith and Wood (2003), "As a genre, reality television involves placing 'ordinary' people before the camera and deriving some entertainment value from the perception of their activities being unscripted" (p. 2). Several critics have described the *unrealistic* nature of reality television, including how many shows appear increasingly scripted and manipulated through producers' editing (e.g., Orbe, 1998). However, the definition offered by Smith and Wood focuses on the fact that reality television is sold, and largely perceived, as unscripted. As such, the "reality" in reality television can be best understood as a social construction—one that uses the seemingly unscripted life experiences of everyday people to create a form of entertainment that the viewing public consumes.

Brief History of Reality Television

Based on the definition offered in the last paragraph, reality television covers a wide range of programming formats. One of the earliest reality television shows was *Candid Camera* (1948), known as "the granddaddy of the reality TV" (Rowan, 2000). This classic show has spawned a number of others that set up various pranks on unsuspecting targets (e.g., *Punk'd, Scare Tactics, Girls Behaving Badly*). Other types of reality television (discussed subsequently) appear to be straightforward—until a big hoax is revealed (e.g., *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance, Hell Date, Boy Meets Boy*). These types of shows have gained popularity as viewers get bored with regular reality television shows (Orbe, 2008).

Another early form of reality television involved competition-based game shows whereby contestants were faced with trivia questions. Over time, game shows became a staple of daytime television (e.g., *The Price is Right, Family Feud*) and also gained immense popularity in primetime slots as well (e.g., *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?, Deal or No Deal, Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?*). More recently, other competition shows pit people against one another as they seek a big monetary prize (e.g., *Big Brother, Survivor*), professional contracts (e.g., *Last Comic Standing, The Apprentice, America's Best Dance Crew*), or the chance to find love (e.g., *The Bachelor/Bachelorette, Joe Millionaire, Next*).

An early popular form of reality television programming in the United States began in the early 1980s with the introduction of *COPS* (Geiser-Getz, 1995). This show allowed viewers to follow police officers in major U.S. cities as they went about their day-to-day interactions with the general public. In addition to other similar shows (e.g., *Dog The Bounty Hunter*), *COPS*

spawned a number of reality television programs focusing on solving crimes (*America's Most Wanted*) or existing unknowns (e.g., *Unsolved Mysteries*). With the public's interest in the criminal aspects of everyday life established, an extension of this type of reality television appeared: court shows. Initially these focused on various small court proceedings (e.g., *The People's Court*); however, more recently these have focused on particular types of court cases (e.g., *Divorce Court*) or the entertaining personalities of particular judges (e.g., *Judge Judy, Judge Mathis*).

For many people, MTV's *The Real World* remains the most commonly recognized form of reality television: the documentary soap opera (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006). This popular show launched a number of similar shows including MTV's *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* and BET's *College Hill,* as well as TLC's *Little People, Big World.* Other documentary-based shows revolve around following people as they engage in various personal or professional activities (e.g., *Sheer Genius, Doctor 90210*). More recently, other shows follow celebrities within their own daily lives (e.g., *The Anna Nicole Show, The Osbournes, Run's House, My Life on the D-List*) or as they compete for various prizes (*Celebrity Apprentice, Celebrity Fit Club*). The popularity of celebrity-based reality television has led VH1 to create an entire block of shows, known as "celebreality" (Orbe, 2008).

The final type of reality television programming features transformative improvements. This type of programming typically involves individuals, or a team of individuals, working with people to achieve dramatic makeovers in terms of personal appearance or style (e.g., *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*), weight (*The Biggest Loser*), personal identity (e.g., *Made*), or family empowerment (e.g., *Supernanny*). Alternatively, the focus of different makeovers is living spaces (e.g., *Trading Spaces, Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, Curb Appeal*) or personal automobiles (e.g., *Pimp My Ride*).

Media Analysis of Reality Television

Each of the different media theories described earlier in the chapter can provide a lens to studying reality television. As expected, different theoretical lenses can result in different understandings of the role that reality-based programming has on

Photo 11.3 What counts as family to you? Historically, U.S. American media has often represented family as a nuclear family with heterosexual parents and two children—a boy and a girl. Today, reality television has helped to expand people's idea of what family means. These photos provide some examples of family.
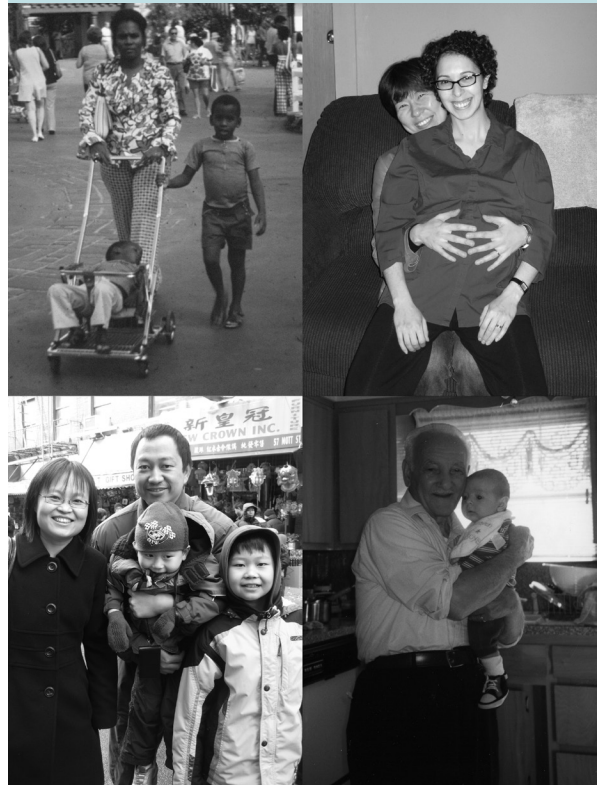
inter/cultural communication. The final section of this chapter draws from different media theories to explore how reality television impacts how people perceive themselves and others through a cultural prism.

Currently, there is certainly no agreement as to the impact that reality television has on societal perceptions of different cultural groups. Some communication scholars might argue that the influence is minimal (limited effects model). These scholars would point to how viewers selectively expose themselves to certain shows that feature images of cultural groups that are consistent with their existing perceptions. For instance, they would note that many of the reality television shows (e.g., *Real Housewives of Atlanta, Let's Talk About Pep, Snoop Dogg's Fatherhood, College Hill*) with predominately African American casts are watched most faithfully by African American audiences whose existing perceptions of African American life are largely established. According to this approach, the images contained in the show—both positive and negative—have little effect on their audiences.

A related theoretical approach to studying reality television might argue that it fulfills different needs for different viewers (uses and gratifications theory). For example, most viewers watch reality television shows for entertainment purposes. Specific shows that provide an educational function (e.g., *TLC's Little People, Big World,* or *Intervention*) may be more influential in affecting perceptions of others (e.g., little people or drug addicts). However, communication scholars from this approach would argue that these shows do more to reinforce existing perceptions than create new ones. In this context, it is important to remember that viewers do not watch television as "blank slates"; instead they come with significant preexisting ideas about culture that are not easily changed.

Other media scholars might disagree. They would argue that reality television shows have a direct impact on how viewers develop their perceptions of self and others (direct effects theory). These scholars would join societal leaders who have criticized many reality television shows for their negatively stereotypical depictions of different cultural groups. Take the case of the MTV hit show, *Jersey Shore.* The show featured several young Italian Americans from the U.S. Northeast whose lives revolve around "GTL" (Gym, Tan, and Laundry), drinking, partying, and hooking up. In fact, the stars of the show proudly described themselves as *guidos* and *guidettes*—terms that they embrace but historically have been regarded as highly offensive slurs. Several national Italian American organizations were so concerned about the negative stereotypical images featured on the show that they called for a boycott from advertisers—several of which withdrew their support from the show. In the end, the controversy generated significant buzz for the show, and propelled it into one of the most watched shows on cable. According to this theoretical perspective, the result of the show, especially for viewers with little interaction with Italian Americans, was an advancement of negative images for this ethnic group.

Agenda-setting theorists would focus on how reality television images contribute to what viewers deem as most important or relevant in society. For instance, think about the central themes of most reality television programming. Producers could showcase stories that highlight inter/cultural understanding, intergroup harmony, and cultural similarity that could work to provide models for viewers who are motivated to engage in healthy, authentic intercultural relationships. However, most often reality television shows contain images that reflect intercultural misunderstanding (e.g., *Wife Swap, Charm School*), intergroup conflict (e.g., *Survivor, Real World/Road Rules: The Duel*), and cultural differences (e.g., *Trading Spouses, Big Brother*). The rationale for this is that drama, conflict, and competition make for "good" television. Viewers, it is presumed, are not interested in watching people who get along and

work together with little to no conflict. Although some might argue that this is true, it does not negate the fact that these are the images that people see the most and come to regard as the most prevalent in society. Agenda-setting theorists would argue that by watching reality television, viewers come to believe that different racial groups can never get along, different religious groups will always have conflict, and women and men come from different planets.

The idea that media images generally, and those that appear on reality television shows specifically, help to create distorted perceptions of the world is consistent with cultivation theory. As such, some cultivation theorists would focus their attention on heavy users of reality television and explore how substantial exposure to this type of programming affects their sense of reality. Scholars might conclude that heavy users believe that the world is filled with more cultural conflict than actually exists. This perception is likely to be paired with rigid stereotypes of different cultural groups that have appeared across various reality television shows. For instance, the recent influx of programs featuring transgendered persons (e.g., *RuPaul's Drag Race, Transform Me, America's Next Top Model, The Real World*) might lead heavy users to blur the lines of sexuality in ways that distort the reality of persons who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgendered.

Of all the media approaches previously discussed, critical cultural studies scholars would be most condemning of reality television shows. These scholars would argue that reality-based television is one of the newest forms of mass mediated exploitation—one in which everyday people are lured into a process by which their life experiences are manipulated to create stories designed to reap the biggest profits for media owners. According to this media lens, reality television shows are inexpensive to produce, yet generate large amounts of income through constant programming rotations and product placement or promotion. Think about it for a moment: Did you ever wonder why the *American Idol* judges all have Coca-Cola cups in front of them? Or how many Cover Girl products are included on *America's Next Top Model?* Or how many MTV shows feature specific musicians, different food and beverage products, and electronic devices (e.g., reality television cast members who are often heard declaring: "We just got a message on our Teen Mobile cell phones!")?

Critical cultural studies scholars would reveal how reality television shows promote certain products in a capitalist world. Viewers interested in the content of the shows are constantly exposed to commercial products. However, this media lens would also reveal the ways in which reality television sells certain ideologies like those related to beauty standards, personal safety, and the American dream. In this regard, reality-based programming works alongside other mass media images to subtly convince viewers to participate in a world where they are primarily consumers. Consider, for instance, how the promotion of culturally specific beauty standards promotes billions of dollars in spending. The same could be said for products related to public safety (desperately needed in the violent world that exists on television) and purchases made to secure the American dream (in spite of person's actual need for the item or their ability to afford them). In the end, existing societal inequalities within a culture continue to persist.

REFLECT 11.4: Think about how culture is represented on one particular reality television show that you have seen. Based on your perceptions of the show, which one of the media theories serves as the most valuable lens to understand how the show might impact its viewers?

NEGOTIATING MEDIA EFFECTS

As illustrated throughout this chapter, media functions as a powerful influence in people's lives. In particular, it represents a substantial social system that contributes to a person's sense of reality. Much has been written about negative media effects, including the ways in which media images promote negative cultural stereotypes (Squires, 2009; Warren et al., 2003). However, it is also important to recognize that reality TV can have both positive and negative effects when it comes to intercultural communication, including providing positive images of different cultural groups (Terreri, 2004), educating people about life issues (Palmer, 2004) and promoting stories of intercultural cooperation (Kiesewetter, 2004). For instance, Pullen (2007) suggests that reality programming on MTV (e.g., *The Real World, Road Rules, Singled Out, Undressed, Next,* etc.) has had a positive effect on how persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer are perceived by viewers. In particular, he argues that the consistent inclusion of LGBTQ persons on these shows works to normalize nonheterosexual experiences that ultimately leads to greater societal acceptability. Similar arguments can be made regarding other shows that provide substantial exposure to underrepresented groups like that which has been seen in TLC's *Little People, Big World,* A&E's *Intervention,* or the National Geographic Channel's *Taboo.*

Yet, most media critics, those who study and analyze media and its effects, have focused on how this unique form of media programming has fallen short of it potential. For the most part, it appears that most reality-based shows have continued the cultural stereotyping that exists across media forms (Darling, 2004; Orbe & Harris, 2008). The fact that shows are sold as reality leads some scholars (e.g., Orbe, 1998) to argue that the images are even more damaging than other types of programming that viewers regard as more fabricated. For example, this appears to be the case for heavy users of reality television who seemingly perceive African American women in largely stereotypical ways. This dynamic is evidenced in Boylorn's (2008) autoethnographic writing where, despite her academic credentials and professionalism, she describes how White students expected her to take on the characteristics of popular reality TV stars like "New York" (aka Tiffany Pollard) from VH1's *Flavor of Love.* What remains unclear is if her students were relying on mass-mediated fueled stereotypes or if her metastereotypes were actually more influential than she believes (Sigelman & Tuch, 1997; Torres & Charles, 2004). Metastereotypes are your perceptions of the stereotypes you think outgroup members have about your ingroups. In either case, however, reality TV images are seen as influential to everyday experiences of inter/cultural communication.

In the end, it is also important to recognize that the various forms of media can have both positive and negative effects in regards to intercultural communication. The key question is how can people maximize positive media effects while minimizing negative ones? One answer to this question is through the development of media literacy skills.

MEDIA LITERACY

One means to negotiate the power that the media has over you is to develop critical literacy skills (Fecho, 1998). In recent years, communication scholars have advocated that media consumers must develop media literacy. Media literacy, by definition, involves developing

a critical understanding of how mass media operates, including learning to read messages behind the media's images.

According to Gerbner (2000), media literacy involves three specific skills. First, media consumers must be able to identify the techniques used to create the images that are perceived to be real. This involves understanding how reality television show producers use visual images, music, lighting, camera angles, and the editing process to influence media images. Second, media consumers must come to understand that the media are businesses geared toward earning profits. When interacting with reality television, ask yourself: Why are certain images of particular cultural groups featured more than others? How do they work to promote images that are profitable in today's society? Third, media consumers must learn to recognize how specific mass media images project particular ideologies (e.g., cultural superiority) and values (e.g., ethnocentrism). In terms of reality television, becoming media literate means that you critically acknowledge the values inherent in the images that are shown and recognize how specific techniques influence viewers in subtle and not-so-subtle ways (Gerbner, 2000).

Photo 11.4   What do you see when you critically examine this cartoon? The media uses stereotypes to provide a simplified view of cultural groups. This view is often inaccurate and self-perpetuating. Here men are stereotyped as tough but unreasonable; women are stereotyped as nurturing but nagging.

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Throughout this section, the focus has been on how reality television works to shape your perception of self and others. Media literacy, however, applies to all forms of the media, not just the mass-mediated images that people see on television. Becoming media literate means that you develop a critical eye for how various media forms—recordings, radio, movies, newspapers, magazines, and new media technologies—function as a cultural socialization agent in terms of how people view the world around them. The increased awareness that comes with media literacy will never eliminate media effects, but it can help to diminish the negative impact that the media has on your everyday life. In terms of inter/cultural communication, becoming media literate enhances the potential for media consumption to lead to greater understanding of how other cultural group members are both different from and similar to ourselves. "Reality TV has evolved into a genre that many media experts believe presents even meaner, more competitive, and more hurtful versions of 'reality' to an ever-expanding audience" (Balkin, 2004, p. 10). Viewers who practice media literacy must understand how the images are produced to maximize profits and how "the meanings and values of reality TV [vary] across national, regional, gendered, classed, and religious contexts" (Sender, 2011, p. 1).

FINAL THOUGHTS

This chapter described the significant role that media plays in terms of how people are socialized to think about themselves, others, and the process of inter/cultural communication. It included a general overview of basic media concepts, terms, and theories. The focus of the chapter was the fairly recent explosion of reality television and how this particular type of programming potentially affects everyday interactions where culture exists as an important issue. Hopefully, this chapter raised your awareness of how the media impacts your own perceptions and motivates you to become more media literate as an informed consumer of the media. Although this chapter focused on reality TV in the United States, understanding the similarities and differences of reality television shows across cultures, and the ways in which cultural values, norms, and beliefs necessitate local adaptation will represent another important step in advanced understanding of inter/cultural communication across national boundaries as this media genre expands further.

CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY ONLINE

Visit: http://gawker.com

Gawker. As the name of the site suggests, people come to Gawker to just watch. You are encouraged to do the same. Whether celebrity gossip or recent news stories are of interest to you, explore the site. Pick a single culture and look for example of how that culture is represented on the site. Draw some conclusions. Do the same for other cultural groups. Compare. Consider what messages the media sends about these various groups and their interactions amongst each other.

" SAY WHAT?

Say What? provides excerpts from overheard real-life conversations in which people have communicated stereotypes. As you read these conversations, reflect on the following questions.

- Have you been in conversations like this before?
- Is there any one of these conversations that stick out to you more than the others?
- What do you think of this conversation?
- How did the stereotype help or hinder the conversation?
- Was there another way the stereotyper could have communicated to convey the same point?
- How do you feel when you hear this conversation or the specific stereotype?
- Do any of these conversations bother you more than others? Why or why not?
- Do any concepts, issues, or theories discussed in the chapter help explain why?

- **Say What?** My roommate and I were watching television when the show *COPS* came on. In this show, arrests of all different types of criminals are depicted. The first arrest that was shown was of a young African American male who was charged with the possession of drugs. Right after this arrest was shown, my roommate stated, "It figures." I asked her what she was referring to.

- **Say What?** "He could move around the stage like he was an actual fairy playing in the woods," remarked Jen. In an attempt to be funny, Patrick blurted out something along the lines of "I don't think he was acting; he was just flaming!" Jennifer and I gave a small chuckle after hearing this remark; however, Chris did not find it so funny. With a look that could kill, he quickly gazed over at Patrick and asked him what he meant by that statement. "Were you implying that all theater actors are homosexuals, or that all gay men are girly?" Chris asked in a stern voice.

- **Say What?** I call my roommate to buy me a copy of the paper. She walks in about 40 minutes later with her father, and she hands me the paper. Her father jokes that I owe him five dollars. I start complaining. I can't believe this class is going to cost me money. Her father laughs and says he's kidding, and my roommate snickers and says, "She's just being a Jew, so cheap!" The response after Rachel said the stereotype was her and her father laughing, and me smiling because I've heard this a million times before. I'm used to being made fun of for being a "cheap Jew."

- **Say What?** "Is it true that sorority girls are snobby and stupid and all they do is party? Because that's what I've heard and all the movies I've seen are like that." I laughed a little and explained to her that my sorority has the highest cumulative grade point average out of all the sororities on campus, most of the girls are making the dean's list, and one of the focal points of my sorority in general is the maintenance of quality grades of our members.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do media socially construct reality? Use at least one theory discussed in the chapter to explain your answer.

2. Compare and contrast the ways in which at least two of the five types of media described in the chapter are cultural socialization agents. Take into consideration the social contexts in which each might be used.

3. What is the hypodermic needle approach, as defined by the chapter? Do you agree with it?

4. Why are the media theories discussed in the chapter relevant for inter/cultural communication?

5. Which media theories discussed in the chapter view media as all-powerful influences on passive audiences?

6. Apply at least two media theories to a single example of a reality television program referenced in the chapter.

7. According to the chapter, what was an early form of reality television? Consider one of the more recent examples mentioned and discuss how reality television has changed. How do these changes reflect the culture? What impact might these changes have on the audience?

8. The chapter says, "Critical cultural studies scholars would be most condemning of reality television shows." Why?

9. How could a person become more media literate? Why is it important for inter/cultural communication?

10. Based on the chapter discussion, describe how specific types of shows contribute or take away from more productive inter/cultural understanding?

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